

**CONTAINER INCLUDING DETACHABLE CUP
AND BUILT-IN WARMING TRAY**

RELATED APPLICATION

[0001] This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 60/391,576, filed June 27, 2002.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

[0002] The present invention relates generally to a container, and, in particular, to a container including a cup that is detachably securable within the container and a lid that can be utilized as a warming tray when the container is heated.

2. Description of the Related Art

[0003] Containers, such as the type used to store food items and the like, are well known in the art. Recently, there has been considerable competition in the container industry to develop new and innovative containers that satisfy the ever-evolving desires of consumers. Today's consumers demand, for example, containers that are economical, easy to handle, stackable, aesthetically pleasing, and/or capable of withstanding extreme temperatures, such as those associated with freezing and microwaving.

[0004] Another desirable feature, which, prior to the present invention, was largely unaddressed in the container art, is the capability of separately storing different food items within a single container. For example, salad tends to lose its crispness if dressing is applied too long before consumption. Preferably, the dressing should be applied just prior to consumption. Before the present invention, however, this required one to carry two separate containers — one for the salad, and another one for the dressing. This, of course, is less convenient than having everything in a single container, particularly when away from home.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] The present invention provides a versatile container that addresses a number of consumer desires, such as those noted above.

[0006] According to one aspect of the invention, a container includes a bowl, a lid for the bowl, and a cup that is detachably securable to the underside of the lid. When the lid is positioned so as to cover the bowl, the cup is securable within the interior of the bowl, and when the lid is placed underneath the bowl, the bowl is supported at a height above at least a portion of the lid such that an air pocket is defined between the bowl and that portion of the lid.

[0007] In another aspect, the present invention relates to a container including (i) a bowl, including a base, a rim, and at least one upstanding sidewall; (ii) a lid for the bowl, the lid including a central panel, a peripheral sealing lip, and a cup-securing structure; and (iii) a cup that is detachably securable to the cup-securing structure. When the lid is positioned so as to cover the bowl, the cup is securable within the interior of the bowl, and when the lid is placed underneath the bowl, the bowl is supported at a height above the central panel of the lid such that an air pocket is defined between the base of the bowl and the central panel of the lid.

[0008] In still another aspect, the present invention relates to a container for separately storing at least two food items. The container includes (i) a bowl, including a base, a rim, and at least one upstanding sidewall; (ii) a lid for the bowl, the lid including a central panel, a peripheral sealing lip, and a stepped portion protruding from the underside of the lid; and (iii) a cup, including a rim that is sized to fit snugly around the stepped portion of the lid to detachably secure to cup to the lid. When the lid is positioned so as to cover the bowl, the cup is securable within the interior of the bowl, and when the lid is placed upside down, underneath the bowl, the stepped portion of the lid supports the base of the bowl at a height above the central panel of the lid such that an air pocket is defined between the base of the bowl and the central panel of the lid.

[0009] A better understanding of these and other features and advantages of the invention may be had by reference to the drawings and to the accompanying description, in which preferred embodiments of the invention are illustrated and described.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0010] FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a container according to a first preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0011] FIG. 2 is another perspective view of the container shown in FIG. 1, with the lid removed and the cup detached from the lid.

[0012] FIG. 3 is a top view of the container shown in FIG. 1.

[0013] FIG. 4 is a side view of the container shown in FIG. 1.

[0014] FIG. 5 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line A-A in FIG. 3.

[0015] FIG. 6 is a perspective view of the container shown in FIG. 1, with the lid removed and the bowl resting on the lid.

[0016] FIG. 7 is a side view of the container shown in FIG. 6.

[0017] FIG. 8 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line B-B in FIG. 7.

[0018] FIG. 9 is a perspective view of a container according to another preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0019] FIG. 10 is another perspective view of the container shown in FIG. 9, with the lid removed and the cup detached from the lid.

[0020] FIG. 11 is a top view of the container shown in FIG. 9.

[0021] FIG. 12 is a side view of the container shown in FIG. 9.

[0022] FIG. 13 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line C-C in FIG. 11.

[0023] FIG. 14 is a perspective view of the container shown in FIG. 9, with the lid removed and the bowl resting on the lid.

[0024] FIG. 15 is a side view of the container shown in FIG. 14.

[0025] FIG. 16 is a cross-sectional view taken along section line D-D in FIG. 15.

[0026] Throughout the figures, like or corresponding reference numerals have been used for like or corresponding parts.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

[0027] A container 100 according to a first preferred embodiment of the present invention is illustrated in FIGS. 1-8.

[0028] The container 100 includes a bowl 200, a lid 300, and a cup 400. The cup 400 is detachably securable to the underside of the lid 300, so that when the lid 300 is placed on the bowl 200, the cup 400 may be secured within the interior of the bowl 200. In this way, the contents of the cup 400 and the bowl 200 may be stored separately from each other, with the lid 300 serving as a lid for both the bowl 200 and the cup 400 therein. For example, salad could be stored in the bowl and dressing could be stored in the cup. Other possible uses for the cup include holding condiments, pickles, grated cheese, dips, sauces, money, and the like.

[0029] As illustrated in FIG. 2, the bowl 200 includes a base 210, upstanding sidewalls 220, and a rim 230. In the preferred embodiment shown, the bowl 200 is generally four-sided. Bowls having other shapes could be used as well, such as, for example, bowls with circular, oval, or polygonally-shaped bases and/or rims.

[0030] Preferably, the bowl rim 230 is wider on two opposite sides 240 than it is on the other two opposite sides 250. The wide rim makes the bowl 200 easier to grasp, particularly when the contents of the bowl 200 are hot.

[0031] Snap tabs 260 are provided at opposite corners of the bowl 200. The snap tabs 260 help to secure the lid 300 to the bowl, as discussed below. Fewer or more snap tabs can be provided, or their location can be varied, as desired.

[0032] The lid 300 includes a central panel 310 and a peripheral sealing lip 320. As shown in FIG. 5, the sealing lip 320 is substantially U-shaped and fits snugly over the rim 230 of the bowl 200, preferably forming an airtight seal between the lid 300 and the bowl 200.

[0033] In the preferred embodiment shown, the central panel 310 is raised slightly relative to the sealing lip 320. This allows the container 100 to accommodate items that are slightly taller than the bowl 200 itself, such as a large piece of fruit, for example. Alternatively, the central panel 310 may be level with or lower than the sealing lip 320.

[0034] Snap tabs 330 at opposite corners of the lid 300 releasably engage with the snap tabs 260 on the bowl 200. The snap tabs 260, 330 are easily unfastened with just the thumb and index finger of a single hand in order to remove the lid 300 from the bowl 200.

[0035] The lid 300 also includes cup-securing means for detachably securing the cup 400 to the underside of the lid 300. In the preferred embodiment shown, the cup-securing means comprises a cylindrical stepped portion 350 that protrudes from the underside of the lid 300. As shown in FIG. 5, the cup 400 has a rim 410 that is sized to fit snugly around the stepped portion 350, thereby securing the cup 400 to the underside of the lid 300.

[0036] An advantageous feature of this preferred embodiment is that the lid 300 can also be used as a warming tray for the contents of the container 100. Prior to heating the contents of the container 100 in a microwave, for example, the lid 300 can be removed from the bowl 200 and placed upside down, underneath the bowl 200, in the manner illustrated in FIGS. 6-8. In this preferred embodiment, the base 210 of the bowl 200 is supported on the stepped portion 350 of the lid 300 at a height above the

central panel 310 of the lid 300, thereby defining an air pocket between the bowl 200 and the lid 300. When the container 100 is microwaved, the air pocket heats up. After microwaving, the hot air pocket helps to keep the contents of the container 100 warm. Meanwhile, the lid 300 catches any condensation that may drip from the bowl 200 during the heating and subsequent cooling processes.

[0037] In another preferred embodiment shown in FIGS. 9-16, the cup-securing means comprises a recess 360' formed in the underside of the central panel 310' of the lid 300'. In this embodiment, the rim 410' of the cup 400' is sized to fit snugly within the recess 360', as shown in FIG. 13.

[0038] In this embodiment, the lid 300' can be utilized as a warming tray in an upright (as opposed to upside down) configuration, such as illustrated in FIGS. 14-16. In this case, the base 210' of the bowl 200' is supported atop a stepped portion 350' protruding from the lid 300' above the recess 360'.

[0039] Those skilled in the art will appreciate that numerous other structures can be utilized for securing the cup to the lid. For example, stepped portions or recesses having different shapes can be used. Such stepped portions and/or recesses also may be threaded, in which case the rim of the cup may also be threaded. Alternatively, the lid and/or the rim of the cup can be provided with a reusable adhesive layer. Still another alternative is to provide hooks on the underside of the lid for releasably engaging the cup rim. These and other alternative cup-securing structures are envisioned within the scope of the present invention.

[0040] Preferably, the bowl, lid, and cup are made of polypropylene. Alternatively, these components can be made of polyethylene, polystyrene, CPET, polycarbonate, and/or other plastic materials. Metal and ceramic materials could also be used, although such materials are generally not suitable for microwaving.

[0041] The embodiments discussed above are representative of preferred embodiments of the present invention and are provided for illustrative purposes only. They are not intended to limit the scope of the invention. Although specific shapes, configurations, materials, etc. have been shown and described, such are not limiting. Modifications and variations are contemplated within the scope of the present invention, which is intended to be limited only by the scope of the accompanying claims.

INDUSTRIAL APPLICABILITY

[0042] This invention relates to a container of the type used to store food items and the like. The container includes a bowl, a lid for the bowl, and a cup that is detachably securable to the underside of the lid. When the lid is positioned so as to cover the bowl, the cup is securable within the interior of the bowl, with the contents of the cup being stored separately from the contents of the bowl. When microwaving the container, for example, the lid can be placed underneath the bowl to serve as a warming tray for keeping the contents of the bowl warm.